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UK dance graduates and preparation for freelance working: the contribution of artist-led collectives and dance agencies to the dance ecology

Karen Wood 

Over the last decade, there has been an emergence of artist-led networks and collectives that reveals the importance of solidarity, activism and belonging. In today's contemporary society, the term 'network' denotes the building of a local community (which could be physical or online). This article will explore some of these networks and collectives and their function for the communities they serve. In addition, it will question what the rise in artist-led networks/collectives reveals about the current economic and artistic position of dance in the UK, focusing in particular on the path new and emerging dance artists take after leaving any kind of formal training and entering the realms of freelance, versatile and fragmented ways of working. What are the options available to this group – commonly referred to as 'emerging artists' – and what are their expectations of further training, maintaining their practice and finding their position in an unstable environment? What do artist-led networks/collectives offer to the emerging artist? What can training institutions offer their graduates to prepare them for this way of working? These are some of the questions that drove the research for this paper. I ground this research in my part-time role as Associate Director of an artist-led collective, Birmingham Dance Network, and map other networks and collectives that have arisen over the last decade. With a specific interest in the opportunities available for young graduates, I will explore artist development programmes and mentoring schemes as offers for training and career progression.

Keywords: Dance, artist, artist-led, network, freelance

Introduction

When dancers graduate, they typically find themselves with a range of options: postgraduate study, teacher training, working in arts administration/management or working as a dance artist, either freelance or within a company or organisation. Aujla and Farrer (2016) categorise the many aspects of a freelancers' role as formal and informal – formal roles as performer, choreographer, teacher and informal tasks as budgeting, marketing and administration. Many freelancers take on more than one job, with one foot in the performing arts and the other in a different field, such as the hospitality sector. This versatile way of working and trend towards a portfolio career is particularly typical of freelancers, as often-times their work is a 'series of short-term contracts interspersed with periods of unemployment or alternative (non-performance based) employment' (Ashton and Ashton 2016). Does undergraduate study prepare students for this and what support mechanisms are in place for their working within the dance sector?

This article has been written to provide a narrative of part of the UK dance field that artists may find themselves in upon graduation. I consider exposure to the topic of freelance working in higher education and how it is formally presented, in addition to how else exposure happens within the learning environment. The article gives some historical information about from the last decade about the political landscape for regional dance agencies¹ and those operating in a freelance capacity. It scopes out the opportunities available for emerging artists post-higher education and considers how these opportunities are provided by dance agencies, dance companies/organisations and artist-led networks.

In writing this article, I occupy an insider/practitioner perspective² in the contemporary and tap dance fields and as an insider of an artist-led network. I am Associate Director of Birmingham Dance Network (BDN)³ and co-founder of Manchester Dance Consortium (MDC).⁴ I also work at Coventry University's Centre for Dance Research, so I position myself in both professional and academic contexts. It is important to reveal my 'artist researcher' position to make transparent any bias that may become apparent, and for you, the reader, to understand what contributes to my perspective and subject positions (see section on collective identity for more on this). In addition, my stance in writing this article is observational of a particular field, movement and time.

I start with a discussion on higher education and the requirement to include employability skills⁵ in undergraduate courses, in UK conservatoire and university. The former have a focus on performance opportunities and the latter on broader experiences. I consider what skills a dance artist needs upon graduating and how these might support a career in dance. Following this, I give some background context on regional dance agencies and their relationship to the country's political environment over the last three decades. I then move to discussing collective identity and subject positions. I use examples to look at mentorships, and I map out what other artist-led networks offer. Subsequently, a discussion on professional development, mentorship and cultural leadership concludes

1 Regional dance agencies are non-profit organisations, partly funded by Arts Council England, to deliver dance activity in the region. You can find a full list here: <https://www.onedanceuk.org/resource/regional-dance-agencies/>

2 I thank Dr Debbie Fionn Barr for this term, borrowed from her (unpublished) PhD thesis, which I had the pleasure of examining.

3 See <https://birminghamdancenetwork.co.uk>

4 See <https://www.mcrdانسortium.com>

5 Sometimes called 'professional skills' and other variations.

the paper. These themes concluding this article might be the elements of what forms a trajectory that individuals find themselves following when they decide to study dance and it becomes their chosen career. Higher education may be the entry point for emerging artists.

Skills from higher education

At the time of writing this article, dance courses in universities and conservatoires are becoming increasingly vulnerable, along with those in other performing arts disciplines, and the dance offer in secondary schools has decreased. However, the recently announced SHAPE (social sciences, humanities & the arts for people and the economy) campaign (Thorpe 2020) might help to 'restore the balance' of the 'soft' academic disciplines, such as those in the performing arts, and 'give back lost weight' to the arts and humanities. In the longer term, this may see the numbers of students interested in studying performing arts at degree level rise. Without these subjects being taught on school curriculums however, there will be fewer students studying them at university. But what happens to those who have studied dance as undergraduates? Where do they go next? And what are their options?

Firstly, we need to understand what happens at undergraduate level. Running through most higher education courses at UK conservatoires and universities is a module/unit that focuses on employability and work place learning— or, rather, an individual's employability skills, attributes and competences (McQuaid and Lindsay 2005; Römgens, Scoupe, and Beusaert 2020). Römgens, Scoupe, and Beusaert (2020) integrated conceptual frameworks from employability and work place learning research to better understand the relationship between them and how they complement each other (and sometimes overlap). The authors mention that employability is defined as 'a multidimensional, competence-based construct' and that competencies have different value depending on the sector or type of task for the individual (Römgens, Scoupe, and Beusaert 2020). Universities will have agreements with organisations for students to arrange work place learning as part of their study. The units of study equip the student with the practical aspects of working life, which could be freelance and varied or salaried, or both, and to help them to think about how they present themselves in the working world. Aujla and Farrer (2016) surveyed independent dancers in the U.K. and one of the conclusions from the research was that dance artists require a myriad of skills that encompass the various roles they perform. However, for an emerging freelancer, navigating the requirements for a versatile dance artist in today's society can be daunting and this calls into question whether the earlier exposure in training is adequate. The support offered during this time can affect whether the student stays within the dance field or decides to earn a living elsewhere.

A key feature of some dance courses and of the employability of students is creativity. Employers are increasingly looking for individuals who can offer creative solutions and can problem solve around the workplace. Rampersad and Paterl (2014) argue for work placements to be a

fundamental component of the student experience, as they bring with them advantages through their 'heavy immersion of the student in the workplace and closely monitored, active reflection'. The particular focus of these work placements is on creativity in leadership. This is important in the dance field, as most students will teach at some point in their career and may take on arts administration or management roles. However, the requirement for creativity in freelance working is also vital, as many opportunities in dance will be in self-employment and entrepreneurship.

The graduate attributes that are stipulated by universities for all undergraduate and postgraduate students to attain from their studies, have, at their core, transferrable skills that are required for employment. Graduate employability is intrinsically linked to the quality of higher education (Rampersad and Patel 2014). Graduate attributes are considered as learning to be enterprising, which involves being creative and innovative. Most dance courses discuss dance as a creative subject and, as part of the practical modules, continually encourage new and innovative ways of creating movement material and working collaboratively.

Collaborative working is a key component of students' learning and experience (Ipate, Mitran, and Pârvu 2014). Working as a small group on a project encourages communication, keeping to deadlines and teamwork, all of which are ranked highly by employers (Ipate, Mitran, and Pârvu 2014). Some courses engage with funding bodies, organisations and freelance artists to support students' exposure to working in the industry. Pegg and colleagues (2012) suggest that engaging employers through the curriculum enhances students' employability by giving them direct access to the industry. In addition, making students aware of their 'possible selves' (Stevenson and Clegg 2011) is vital in preparing them to acknowledge their capacity for future work. The possible selves theory requires students to think about what they want to attain in the future and what they see themselves becoming. This can also be called 'visioning' and is a useful strategy for looking ahead and preparing for what the future could become for each individual.

Returning to engaging with other organisations, this kind of collaboration could also provide opportunities for work-based learning. Gunn and Kafmann (2011) recognise the advantage of embedding work-based learning in the curriculum. Some dance companies offer apprenticeships to recent graduates that help to transition the artist from training to working, within a specific role in a company (e.g. Motionhouse, ACE dance and music, Richard Alston Dance Company and more). This can be a point of departure for working as a freelance dance artist. Sometimes, this may be driven by the company rather than by the individual's unique learning objectives. However, individuals who have an interest in teaching, making their own work and performing in their own or others' work enter into what may seem to them undefined and unknown territory. Flexibility, adaptability and networking are key skills for emerging artists and may be taught at undergraduate level in employability skills modules or units. What most artist-led networks offer is a contribution to maintaining these essential skills, while helping students to maintain their

practice and find their identity, and this comes in different forms, which will be discussed in the section on professional development.

Dance agencies also play a key role in providing networking and professional development opportunities, something they have been doing since their inception. The next section offers context on these agencies and the turbulent politics they have worked through.

Dance infrastructure in the UK

Regional dance agencies were formed in the 1990s (Burns and Harrison 2009) as infrastructure to support engagement with and participation in dance activity. The first three such agencies were in Newcastle, Swindon and London, closely followed by Nottingham, Birmingham and Leeds. This coincides with the decade in which the Labour government came to power and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (now the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport) was formed – an indication of an increased valuing of cultural practices and of dance as an art form. Each of the regional dance agencies have their own remit but professional development was and still is an element of their provision. The Arts Council England (ACE) report⁶ produced by Susanne Burns and Sue Harrison in 2009 maps England's dance ecology and economic situation between 2004 and 2008, and also provides a useful timeline of dance activity from 1969 to 2009 (Burns and Harrison 2009). The report shows the progression of investment during this time and the formation of regularly funded organisations (now called National Portfolio Organisations) and their activity. The number of NPO's have fluctuated over the years and some have lost funding for others to gain. In 2020, there are over 800 in the U.K.⁷ In the Dance Mapping report's conclusion, there is 'A vision for dance in the year 2020' (253), in which dance is a 'confident field with a workforce that is fit for purpose. The workforce will be better distributed and so will the work ensuring that engagement and participation is possible no matter where you are in England'. The report continues by acknowledging that support is required for the development of new business models and it calls for 'stronger dialogue between trainers and educators' (2009, 253) to ensure that, as previously mentioned, the workforce is properly trained and equipped.

This ACE report highlights a need to address the challenges with the provision of training and professional development. If we note again here the timing of the report – published in 2009, the research surveyed activity over the period 2004–2008 – we can perhaps start to link the rise of artist-led networks to the gap that was becoming evident in training and professional development opportunities. MDC, having branched out of The Watching Dance: Kinesthetic Empathy project⁸ funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (2008–2011), started with scoping out the Manchester dance landscape and delivering activity from 2012. BDN was founded in 2013 by three local artists and Dance Reading⁹ was founded in 2014 by two artists – all three networks noticing a gap and addressing a need for provision. Over the last six years others have appeared, including Tap Dance Research Network, East Midlands Dance

6 See: https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/Dance_mapping_full_report.pdf

7 See: <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/national-portfolio-2018-22/more-data-2018-22>

8 See <http://www.watchingdance.org>

9 See <http://www.junctiondance.co.uk>

- 10 See <https://www.facebook.com/eastmidsdanceartistnetwork/>
- 11 See <http://www.prodanceleeds.com>
- 12 See <https://www.dancemama.org>

Artist Network¹⁰ and ProDanceLeeds.¹¹ All of these operate as a collective voice, to advocate for and represent the freelance artist and the different genres within dance, and offer workshops and other professional development opportunities. There are others with more specific remits, such as Dance Mama,¹² set up by dance artist Lucy McCrudden to support and mentor people negotiating the challenges of being working parents. These small and important networks/organisations have found a niche in the marketplace that has emerged from the requirement for support, training and continuing professional development.

Although regional dance agencies provide training and continuing professional development, they have limited resource and capacity to deliver the scope required by today's versatile dance artists. Today, in 2020, we have fewer regional dance agencies than we did in 2008–09, when there were 37 (Burns and Harrison 2009). Capacity has reduced further through some agencies merging and providing activity for larger regions. This has followed a change from a Labour government to a coalition in 2010, and a Conservative government in 2015. Streamlining the arts in an era of austerity has meant that some provision has disappeared. However, joining forces as collectives in resistance to austerity measures and to ensure that the artform survives and thrives has meant that artists are now leading on their own models of professional development, ones that represent the needs of a community in direct communication with that community.

Collective identity

Identifying as a collective has its strength in producing action towards a common goal and the mobilisation of a political stance. It raises awareness of the particular community and there is power in hearing a collective voice. Artist-led collectives or networks have formed communities of individuals, sometimes working in a fragmented way and with little local support, to feel part of and belong to something larger than themselves. Ashton and Ashton (2016) point to belonging as being a key component of freelance dancers' identity, one which contributes to a 'strong dance culture'. Other components noted by the authors are vocational training and family activity and how these combine and feed the experience. Alternatively, we can think of Ashton and Ashton's view as being about the different subject positions we adopt, aligning with Alice Rayner's (1993) perspective. I may sometimes hear you as a woman, sometimes as a dancer and sometimes as a mother or a mix of these, and these may at times be conflicting. My subject positions may be familiar to others and, when we are drawn to be part of a named collective or community, that familiarity encourages feelings of solidarity and draws on the universal human need for attachment. These elements shape and feed the collective identity of a community over time and help to send messages to those outside the community, such as authorities and organisations, suggesting a wave of energy in a social movement.

A collective identity, though, is 'an act of imagination' (McGarry and Jasper 2015). In the imagination, collective identities can also become

fixed and impervious. There is a risk of a collective identity being an 'imperfect fit' (3) with personal identities, and of giving increased power to certain individuals to represent others within the community. There might also be moments of wanting to belong to or own the collective identity, and sometimes not, depending on the activity. Some people may be completely committed and invested in belonging to a community and others more cynical. There is a wavering of investment over time and those at the core of the community are the ones keeping it going. If a sense of belonging cannot be maintained, then identities fade. Hekman (2000) warns that collective identities can be 'stripped of ambiguity, fluidity and individuality', which are some of the reasons for forming a collective identity in the first place. A carefully planned and considered regular check-in of the intentions and purpose of the collective, with the community it serves, should be held, allowing for fluidity and individuality to shape the future of the collective.

However, being part of a collective and recognising that the voice of that community is louder together than individually, gives power and acknowledgement to that community. When groups of people form and identify a shared need, action taken satisfies more than one person. Artist-led networks have formed as a result of their identifying gaps in professional development opportunities and taking it upon themselves to provide this for the community.

Professional development

Networking with other artists is a key skill, and artist-led networks provide hosted gatherings of people trying to negotiate similar things. Some provide professional classes, and participants can socialise prior to or after these, with exchanges happening that can lead to future work opportunities. Support in finding studio space can be helpful if artists want to make their own work, and they may then need a performance opportunity at a platform or a festival. Some networks produce and manage performance sharings or events for emerging artists, which encourage feedback with which they can develop the work. Some provide mentoring opportunities, including more established mentor programmes, which are opportunities for emerging artists to develop their capacity and skills for working as a freelancer.

Mentor programmes may help to transition students from graduation to working in the profession. Farrer and Aujla (2016) conducted a rigorous study on independent dancers and their motivations for pursuing their careers and produced a report. The report highlights recommendations from the research, which include more formal mentorships and networking opportunities. The participants of this research emphasised the importance of networks and relationships and one participant specifically mentioned their supportive relationship with Gill Clarke, who encouraged them to attend events and workshops, which reveals an informal mentoring relationship. Clarke campaigned and advocated for independent dance artists and was a founding member of Independent Dance (ID); an artist-led organisation that nurtures and serves the independent dance sector

to this day, based in London. Interestingly, MDC was founded on a concept borrowed from a Canadian organisation called Series 808 (which unfortunately no longer exist), which was that of offering an 'outside eye' for choreographers developing work and mentorship for the artists they were working with; much like ID. From Farrer and Aujla (2016) research, it is evident that informal mentoring happens within dance but that there are few formal structures in place for creative mentoring or career transition. A study in Australia, conducted by Dawn Bennett (2009), surveyed dancers and one of the conclusions from the research was that 'most dance artists require the skills to run a small business, write grant applications and manage time, projects and people' (p.33). Some dance agencies, organisations and companies offer mentor programmes but not always consistently. Perhaps a programme that clearly defined its purpose and aims and who it was for, would serve a community of emerging artists who were transitioning to a professional career and might want creative development.

BDN's pilot mentor programme, which ran in 2019, involved seven emerging artists, who were recent graduates, transitioning from a different career or transitioning into freelancers. The mentoring took place over six months and consisted of three or four sessions with one of the network's three directors – all of whom had worked, or were still working, as freelancers and had their own artistic practices. The programme provided skills in grant application writing (including a session provided by Arts Council England), time management, creative development of choreographic ideas, and where to go and who to approach when looking for work. This chimes with Aujla and Farrer (2016) research, which points to these capabilities/abilities and their importance in a dancer's diverse career as recognised skills. From Aujla and Farrer (2016) research, it is proposed that continuous formal mentor provision is crucial in developing the freelance dance artist. The key skills for a diverse career are important considerations for teaching undergraduates. Some universities have access to careers departments who can deliver sessions on undergraduate and postgraduate courses.

The evaluation of BDN's mentor programme revealed that all of the participants were positive about the experience, and they all expressed how the support was valuable in their transitioning to a professional career. In summary, the fundamental aspects for the mentees were opportunity-seeking and feelings of empowerment and self-belief. From seeing the benefits to these artists, we have decided to continue the mentor programme as an ongoing offer to the professional community. Other artist-led networks have similar offers. MDC has mentored artists who have presented work at their platforms. The mentor was always someone with a specialism that reflected the theme of the platform; for example, if the theme was sound the mentor would be a specialist in this. The mentoring worked well for the artists, as they received advice from someone with specialist skills. ProDanceLeeds have a Graduate Artist Scheme that offers mentorship focused around developing teaching practice. Artist Grace Nicol founded Womxn SRSly,¹³ a platform for female artists to be supported to show work and be creatively mentored. Dance Reading

13 See: <https://www.grace-nicol.com/womxn-srsly>

have knowledge-sharing opportunities, with professionals being given a platform to share expertise with each other. What mentorships offer, and what these small organisations provide, are opportunities for skills-sharing and upskilling in creative development and teaching practices for emerging, graduate and transitioning artists.

Other professional development opportunities are available through these organisations, including workshops, skills labs, professional class, festivals and performance sharings/platforms. Dance companies and organisations, such as Rambert, 2Faced Dance Company and Studio Wayne McGregor, also offer similar development opportunities. These training and performance opportunities offer artists the chance to come together and, therefore, returning to my earlier point, networking is a key skill for freelance artists in their gaining further employment and creative opportunities. Understanding what is needed to be able to do this, which involve confidence, professionalism and social media presence, are and should continue to be a key element for employability modules within training institutions.

Cultural leadership

Networking and a strength in collective identity is the power of a collective voice and a place to find common ground and belonging to a group of like-minded individuals. Ken Bartlett calls for (community) dance to 'see and recognise what we have in common...we can promote greater understanding for the individual within the group and for the group as part of its wider community' (2017). Bartlett is discussing community dance practice here but what he says is meaningful regarding all aspects of dance, and is relevant to freelance practitioners whose practice may well include community dance. Finding common ground and humanity with each other is where the strength and power of a collective identity may lie.

Is this a new form of cultural leadership emerging? Is collective leadership a new practice? Leadership is practice; it may be part of a daily/weekly/monthly investment in an art form that forges new relationships and networks and enables voices to be heard. Leadership practitioners do not have to be in an organisation or institution, finding themselves in a continually shifting environment where negotiation and facilitation become vital to the practice. Constantly seeking 'common humanity' and encouraging the creation of opportunity are the cornerstones of leadership development. Essential to the cultural landscape of the twenty-first century, the cornerstones of cultural leadership are becoming ever more present and prominent.

The term cultural leadership has emerged as a concept over the last seventy years and has been 'amplified by crises in the last decade in major UK cultural institutions' (Sutherland and Gosling 2010). These crises refer to the financial situations of major British cultural institutions¹⁴ between 1995 and 2005, which led to the introduction of the Labour government's Cultural Leadership Programme in 2006, by Chancellor of the Exchequer,

14 See Sutherland and Gosling (2010) article for more information.

Gordon Brown. This pushed the terms ‘arts administration’ and ‘arts management’ into the background and shone a light on the need for ‘leadership’. The difference here is in the skill of enabling and facilitating experiences of culture,¹⁵ not just the logistics and practicalities of running organisations. Sutherland and Gosling (2010) surveyed UK government policy and other documents and interviewed 12 people who occupied arts leadership roles. Their findings suggest that there was a large emphasis on ‘democratising and instrumentalising culture concerned with measurable social and economic benefits’ (2010, 23). This research suggests that cultural leaders are advocates for culture and that they facilitate experiences of culture for participants while creating opportunities and enabling others to lead opportunities. Sutherland and Gosling call the latter an example of the ‘process of distributed leadership’. The process of distributed leadership is essentially what happens when collectives form and take their development and opportunities into their own hands.

Leadership distribution processes have enabled collectives/networks to be formed and the potential and capacity of individuals to be acknowledged through interaction with cultural and educational experiences of dance. Burt states that ‘when recent dance artists critique the institutionalised dance world, they are taking the first steps towards ungoverning the controls that are applied through the dance market’ (Burt 2016). Applying Burt’s statement to the artistic leadership of networks, I suggest that the ‘critique’ here is an assessment of the leadership structures that operate in institutions and might not align with what a freelancer requires, therefore the artists ‘ungoverning’ these structures and creating a model of their own. The result of this is the rise of artist-led initiatives that serve the community directly and facilitate and enable a new framework of distributed leadership.¹⁶

Although key skills for cultural leadership as a practice can be proposed – facilitation, negotiation and advocacy to name a few – are graduates equipped with this knowledge before leaving training and embarking on a freelance career? I noted previously regarding the Burns and Harrison report for ACE (Burns and Harrison 2009) that a stronger dialogue was called for to equip the workforce. This still remains a challenge for the profession and it relies heavily on working together, even more so in the vulnerable times of 2020 in which we find ourselves. Dance graduates need training institutions to continue to expose them to and equip them with the key skills for freelance working, including skills for cultural leadership, networking and creative development as part of their practice.

Conclusion

Graduates entering the dance profession are not always aware of the variety of jobs in the arts they could be eligible for. Only 10% of all graduates¹⁷ including those trained at conservatoires, end up dancing professionally for a company. Not all dance graduates want to perform on a professional stage though. The rest of the industry is made up of freelance dancers, teachers, choreographers, project managers,

15 Some dancers have participated in the Clore Leadership Programme (<https://www.cloreleadership.org>) that provides training for cultural leadership in the arts.

16 It is important to acknowledge that there is potential for artist-led organisations to become established institutions – as has positively happened with organisations such as Independent Dance.

17 This figure is from OneDanceUK’s ‘A Guide to Careers in Dance: Championing dance for all young people’, found here:

administrators and other arts-related positions. The versatility of a career in dance needs to be fully prepared for and awareness of the availability of support post-graduation needs to be heightened before students leave an institution.

Artist-led networks have a role to play here. They already provide an array of professional development options, but the one that is likely to have the biggest impact is mentorship. Grace Nicol mentions in her Dance Dialogues podcast (Elderkin 2019) that mentoring, whether informal or formal, can support creative development and form relationships that last far beyond the duration of the mentorship itself. I have discussed the positive outcomes of mentoring in the example of BDN's pilot programme and have described Aujla and Farrer (2016) research on mentorship in dance. However, there is a lack of research in this area of professional development for dance artists and a gap in provision that artist-led networks are filling, and need to continue to fill. Not only this, but artist-led networks are providing a collective identity that artists can be associated with and they are providing good examples of cultural leadership through processes of distributed leadership. Artist-led networks must ensure that they keep connected to the communities they serve and continually evaluate their requirement to those communities. These actions will keep them at the forefront of cultural leadership and fluid in their operations. The collective voice is important and powerful and in today's contemporary society, acknowledging this for the purpose of better working practices and planning and delivery of key skills for the workforce, will provide for a sustainable future.

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